Things not for themselves

Things not for themselves: idolatry and consecration in Orthodox Ethiopia

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I am not sure what is immaterial. A spirit? An imaginary being? The object of an idea? Love? Friendship? A relationship? A spirit (or a god) seems a very different kind of thing from a thought (or its object), but both might, from a certain point of view, get classed as immaterial things. I am also not sure that the Ethiopian Orthodox Christians I have worked with on the Zege peninsula and in Addis Ababa think primarily in terms of material versus immaterial things. They certainly use dichotomous language for talking about religious life, but usually in the language of world (*alem*) versus spirit (*menfes*), or flesh (*siga*) versus spirit. As Michael Scott once pointed out to me, this is not the same as opposing matter to non-matter – who are we to say that spirit is an immaterial thing and not, say, a different kind of material? [1] More to the point, When an Ethiopian Orthodox Christian talks about the flesh and the spirit, we cannot assume that they are using flesh as a synecdoche for all matter. Flesh is a very specific kind of matter around whose very specific properties – its desires, its needs, and its tendency to putrescence - much of Orthodox practice revolves.

Understanding Ethiopian Orthodox approaches to materiality, therefore, means looking at different kinds of material and how they relate to one another. Orthodox ritual practice assembles human bodies and religious objects and substances in such a way as to implicate divine or spiritual agents as participants. The best way to

understand Orthodox materiality, its limits, and the problems it addresses, is to look at how these components are assembled with regard to one another and possibly, in the process of assembling, transformed.

Two key points of concern will emerge from this analysis: idolatry and consecration. Ethiopian Orthodoxy does not possess a strong iconoclastic tradition, and makes considerable use of icons and religious substances such as holy water. Despite this fact (or because of it), the avoidance of idolatry remains a pressing concern.

Anxieties of idolatry concern the purported failure of others to recognize that there is something beyond the material thing, from which proper authority derives – although this beyond-ness may remain a rather indeterminate quality. Consecration concerns the way in which objects, bodies, and substances are authorized and made fit for religious communication. Techniques of consecration lie at the heart of Ethiopian Orthodox practice, and if we can work out what it means to sanctify something, we will be much closer to resolving this question of what lies beyond the object. The answer may or may not be "something immaterial"; but it will always be something to do with authority. It is this relationship between material substance, and the authority of what lies beyond the material substance, that I want to explore.

I plan to trace how Ethiopian Orthodox Christians draw the flesh into relation with material substances and with things or agents that are not immediately present to the senses. This may mean God or the saints, but it may also mean historical events and personages that are no longer here but that can be intimated or recalled through signs. In each case, the absent agent is important because it is more powerful than the present ones, and is understood to lend its authority or power to them.

The orientation of things

The matter-spirit question has deep roots in Ethiopian Christianity. The Church follows the non-Chalcedonian tradition of miaphysitism, along with the Coptic, Armenian, and Syriac Orthodox Churches. They rejected the Christology of the Council of Chalcedon (AD 451), which stated that Christ was of two natures, divine and human. The miaphysite churches held instead that Christ was of one single nature, which was an inextricable mix of divinity and humanity (not, as is sometimes assumed, the gnostic position that Christ was only divine, or the Arian one that he was only human). The distinction now seems like a semantic quibble, and indeed I have been told many times that Christology is no longer a major point of difference between Ethiopian Orthodoxy and the Orthodox and Catholic churches of Europe.

There remains, however, a lingering discourse that describes the Ethiopian Church as more archaic than most, preserving a number of Hebraic traditions such as the Levitical dietary laws and the use of holy arks in church (Ullendorff 1956, 1968, Rodinson 1964, Pedersen 1999). There has been a concomitant tendency (from a Eurocentric Christian perspective) to cast Ethiopian Orthodoxy as more 'material', more tradition-bound, and less transcendental than other branches of Christianity (Getatchew 1996). This is a narrative that most Ethiopian Orthodox Christians would challenge, being, as we will see, intensely concerned with the danger of treating material things as having moral power in their own right. This tendency to desire self-sufficiency is a mark of arrogance (*t'igab*), one of the primary sins to which the flesh, in particular is prone (Levine 1965, Messay 1999). The discipline of the flesh through fasting is, accordingly, an integral and indispensable focus of Ethiopian Orthodox daily practice (Ephraim 1995, Boylston 2013).

The Ethiopian Orthodox solution to the problem of the flesh is not so much effacement as a change of orientation towards authority and absence. To illustrate: over coffee in Addis Ababa, I asked some theologically literate church activists about flesh and spirit. They told me about certain ways in which church teaching, traditionally a monastic pursuit, had "turned towards the world" since the 1960s via various Sunday School and lay education movements. The conversation went as follows (paraphrased from fieldnotes):

> **Tom:** You mentioned a turn towards the world. What is the relationship between church and world? What does it mean for Christians to be in the world?
>
> **Altaye**: No Christian can be totally separate from the world. The challenge is how to live in it - that is spirituality. You must select. Not all of the world is bad, and maturity is being able to select between the good and the bad.
>
> **Tom:** So it's not about escaping from the flesh?
>
> **Belete:** We are created with flesh... What matters is your ideology, your intention - where your work is heading.

Spirituality, that is, has as much to do with intention, practice, and desire as with the physical status of things or bodies (Wright 2002). There is nothing to suggest that fleshliness (or worldliness) and spirituality constitute an absolute dualism in the general understanding of Ethiopian Orthodox Christians. An action or object may be

more or less worldly, or more or less spiritual, depending on usage, provenance, and context. A handful of holy ash, byproduct of the baking of communion bread, is a very spiritual thing indeed; but there are plenty of demons that, while lacking bodies, can only be base and worldly. What we need to understand is how things and bodies become more or less spiritual: by being drawn into relation with absent others through symbolic form and practical interaction.

I have argued elsewhere (2013) that the fasts and feasts make present what is absent: saints, divine figures, and foundational acts of devotion that are absent from us by their pastness or their disembodiment. I also argued that this representation is not merely expressive, but ties practitioners bodily into relationships of trust and dependence with these foundational, absent figures and events – and through them to a God who is omnipresent but difficult to reach or know. These forms of relationship-making with saints through holy actions and objects can also be essential to religious community-formation (Heo 2015).

Here I would like to focus on form: how formal resemblances connect present actions to past deeds and personages. Fasting on certain days (say, the Assumption of Mary) creates, by analogical resemblance, a connection between the present practitioner and the sufferings of Mary two thousand years ago in the holy land. This resemblance, because it is an imitation, is understood to be inferior and submissive to the act or person being recognized, but also as participating in their story. The form of fasting connects the faster to a beyond, in a relationship of hierarchical submission to that beyond. Formal imitation creates a relation, that is, not just with beings that are not tangibly present, but also with authority in general. I will try to build on this claim in what follows.

But perhaps the main reason that people give for fasting is to discipline and

weaken the flesh: to mitigate our propensities for aggression, lust, and greed, and thus help people to maintain a spiritual disposition (Levine 1965, Malara, forthcoming). This does not constitute an attempt to negate the flesh, except in extreme circumstances, but to prepare and condition one's body to be in a more spiritual state – ready to take the Eucharist, or simply to be in a better moral position, more tuned for salvation.

The Eucharist and other forms of divine consumption can actually help in this disciplinary process. One young trainee priest told me that he intended to marry, because monastic life was "very, very, very, very difficult." But he was very much troubled by the temptation to lose his virginity with his girlfriend before marriage, which would make him unable to serve in the clergy. He spent much of his time thinking about this, but when he took Holy Communion, it would take over his body and lift the burden from him, and he could confess, repent, and go back to service. The Eucharist was for him a lynchpin that sustained him on his religious trajectory and liberated him, for a time, from worldly desire. The cure for the problems of the flesh, then, was a different sort of fleshly engagement, a higher kind of consumption.

There are other vital forms of material engagement that are essential to popular Orthodox practice, especially given the limitations on Eucharistic participation. The use of holy water is one (Hermann 2012, n.d., Malara n.d.), complemented by holy ash. Water and ash can be ingested or rubbed on the skin, but also transported and passed on to others, who may be too sick to collect the substances themselves. As Diego Malara (forthcoming) describes, the material qualities of the substances give them ethical affordances – they, and the blessing they convey, can be shared among the faithful, and can become tokens of our care and regard for one another.

Webb Keane (2014) has argued that Orthodox materialities should be viewed in terms of the "ethical affordances" of matter that "provide ways of treating the world as ethically saturated." Our example of the sharing of holy water supports this argument, but requires an addition: the materials of religious practice have ethical affordances because they are divinely empowered. The value of holy water is not reducible to its material affordances alone, but also to its having been in some sense activated by a higher authority.

Holy water and holy ash must always come from a church. According to Hermann (n.d.), if a natural holy spring is found, a church will usually be built on the spot so as to circumscribe its power within institutional boundaries. In other cases, holy water or ash come from acts of blessing by priests, and it is by these means (either direct from God, or through his ordained agents) that substances become media by which believers engage with and ingest some portion of God's power. There appears to be some debate about the precise manner in which God's power or blessing enters or charges the water or ash (as we should expect), but there is no doubt that the substances themselves are thereby empowered, and will remain so if passed on subsequently to others. Here, as with the fasts, an element of imitative resemblance is present: holy water recalls the water that came from Christ's flank on the cross, while also presenting some formal resemblances to Eucharistic wine (Fritsch 2011, Malara n.d.). Attenuated resemblances of the Eucharist may invoke attenuated irruptions of divinity.

It is important to realize that substances like holy water are historical entities. It matters very much which church a particular bottle of holy water comes from. In my original fieldsite on the Zege peninsula, where Christianity has been established for some 700 years, the water of Azwa Maryam monastery is well regarded. This is

largely due to the miraculous acts associated with the place: the peninsula's founder, Saint Betre Maryam, had a vision of Mary on the spot where the monastery now stands. The efficacy of water or ash cannot come from its material qualities alone, but from a history of empowerment: proximally from the priest who prays on it, at one remove, from the saint whose devotion brought blessing to the place; ultimately from the action of God. Holy items cannot be understood just in terms of their material qualities or affordances, but what they have done and what has been done to them, and by a series of associations with special actions and actors (Kaplan 1986). Sanctity, and sacred power, are historical products of divine and human interaction. We therefore need to understand the sanctity and the power of material things in terms of how their histories are remembered, recounted, diffused, and repeated: how people trace the relationships that they have accrued (Hanganu 2010).

Ethiopian Orthodox Christians do not solve the problems of flesh and desire by completely turning away from matter. Instead they seek transformations, both of flesh and of the substances with which it comes into contact. These practices train practitioners' dispositions beyond the material things of desire, but the medium in which this happens is flesh and substance – we are all in the gutter, but we can learn to look at the stars, at least for some of the time. Holy water and the Eucharist involve material manifestations of God, or of divine blessing, in the tangible world. They invoke God's power, but they also refer back to historic actions of holy people and emanations of divine blessing. Like fasting, they enact formal imitations of sacred prototypes – and these prototypes are always historical in nature.

People deal with the problem of the limits of matter by seeking to draw bodies and substances into relation with higher things. But this drawing-into-relation requires the transformation of those bodies and substances: to discipline them through fasting,

empower them by invoking divine blessing, or link them to divine beings and events through symbolic and representative work: making analogical resemblances and indexical connections.

Idolatry: beyond the dumb matter of the other

Good things are those that have been orientated toward the beyond and made subordinate to it. From here we can start to understand why idolatry matters in the Ethiopian Orthodox context. Anthropological literature on iconoclasm has tended to focus on images and problems of representation: the human-made nature of images, the fact that representations of the limitless can be controlled, owned, manipulated, have their meanings transformed, or the way that iconoclasts think image-worshippers unable to distinguish between representation and the represented, and therefore to lack purity, elevation, civilization, or simply intellectual capacity (Lévy-Bruhl 1923, Gell 1998, Spyer 2001, Latour 2002). These concerns have been, in one way or another, ever-present in the Abrahamic traditions, with their distinctive arrangement of the relations between matter, transcendence, and exclusivity.

As Sonja Luehrmann (2010) writes, the regularity of iconoclastic controversies going back to the 8th century has lent a tone of conscious defiance to contemporary Orthodox iconic practices; icon venerators do so in the knowledge that there are those who despise or misconstrue their actions. The most common reference point is St John Damascene's 8th Century Defence Against Those who Oppose Holy Images (1898 [730]):

> "I do not worship matter; I worship the God of matter, who became matter for my sake, and deigned to inhabit matter, who worked out my salvation

> through matter. I will not cease from honouring that matter which works my salvation. I venerate it, though not as God."

St John's defense of images hinges on the distinction between worship (*latreia*) and veneration, and on the idea of all Creation as representation of the ineffable: humankind is the original image of God, and the question of representation is therefore the question of the flesh. But if veneration, not worship, is due to certain material forms, then the implication is that all matter, flesh or otherwise, is to be understood ultimately as representation: the first image was the human body. What matters in the final instance, and what actually merits worship in itself, is that which is beyond the material thing, that ineffability that it renders tangible. The veneration of icons, images, or any other substance, is contingent on the recognition that what really matters is the beyond.

> "The Scripture says, "You have not seen the likeness of Him." (Ex. 33.20) What wisdom in the law-giver. How depict the invisible? How picture the inconceivable? How give expression to the limitless, the immeasurable, the invisible? How give a form to immensity? How paint immortality? How localise mystery? It is clear that when you contemplate God, who is a pure spirit, becoming man for your sake, you will be able to clothe Him with the human form. When the Invisible One becomes visible to flesh, you may then draw a likeness of His form."

The text of the Defence of Images is still worth reading for the nuance of its account of materiality and representation. It sets a tone for much subsequent Orthodox

thinking about the relation between representation and prototype, and about the morality of matter. The Incarnation makes representation possible; it is no mistake to paint the human form of God, because human forms were already images anyway. In this way, Christ is understood to render obsolete many of the troubles of idolatry that vexed the Mosaic Israelites and their golden calves.

In Ethiopian Orthodoxy, however, the focus of material concern has tended to be paganism and nature-worship rather than the idolatry of artifacts, for good historical reasons. The formative era of the contemporary Orthodox attitude to sainthood and materiality was the reign of the Emperor Zara Yaqob (r. 1434-1468), today remembered as a great religious philosopher-King and ardent centralizer (Kiros 2011). Concerned that the state religion had not taken hold deeply with a peasantry who still seemed to retain mainly pagan practices, Zara Yaqob embarked on a campaign of standardization, regularizing the Orthodox calendar for all citizens and vigorously promoting cults of the Cross and the Virgin (Kaplan 2002, 2014, Taddesse 1972b). Kaplan remarks that the use of imagery was probably well judged, given the extremely limited literacy of the general population, and that this was also the era in which the calendrical cycles of fasting became normative Orthodox practice (Kaplan 2014). Zara Yaqob's militancy succeeded in placing religious imagery and bodily practice at the heart of the religious life of the peasantry. There were counter movements in Ethiopia at this time, most notably the Stephanites, who refused to venerate the image of the cross, the saints or, crucially, the Emperor. This suggests that a seed of iconoclastic thought has long been present in inchoate form, but the Stephanites were violently suppressed and later re-incorporated into the mainstream (Kaplan 2002). A century later there followed the Jihad of Mohammed Grañ, in which vast numbers of churches, paintings, and relics were destroyed, and it seems

reasonable to suggest that there would have remained little appetite for iconoclasm after that.

Nature worship, on the other hand, is still a source of anxiety. A friend of mine from the Zege forest likes to make this point by saying that his grandmother thinks that Mary is a kind of *qollé* female tree spirit. Multiple people have made the point to me that "we do not worship stones and water" – a clarification that seems to be necessitated by the richness of Ethiopian Orthodoxy's material heritage, especially the rock-hewn churches of Lalibela, which are cut into the landscape itself. Orthodox Christians in Zege, too, have an extremely close, centuries-old relationship with the landscape. But despite and because of this, they are adamant that the blessed nature of the land comes from beyond: from God, not from the rocks (Boylston 2015). Young people in Zege still speak quietly of people in the forest who sacrifice chickens to the spirits of the Lake, and the existence of various dangerous autochthonous spirits is widely accepted – though all subordinate to the power of God and kept under control on his behalf by the Archangel Michael.

The importance of what lies behind the thing is marked by an explicit discourse about signs and resemblances, as explained to me by Abba S'om, the local priest in Zege responsible for exegesis and public education. I had visited him after the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross, which celebrates the Empress Helena's discovery of the remnants of the true cross on Calvary, and culminates across Ethiopia in the burning of giant bonfires topped by wooden crosses. It may be that the burning derives from pre-Christian harvest festivals still found elsewhere in the country, but I was curious as to how people would interpret the public burning of the cross, which seemed at least potentially to suggest the opposite of a Christian celebration.

Abba S'om told me, first, that the idea was not to destroy but to illuminate (*mabrat*) the cross, in line with a verse from a votive hymn sung at the festival. He then explained to me that the cross was a sign or symbol (*milikkit*): if you were to destroy a photograph of me, nothing would happen to my person. Similarly, if you destroy a cross, nothing happens to Christ or the Trinity. He had given a sermon at the festival explaining that the cross was our power and our salvation (*haylacchin*, *medhanítacchin*), but also our sign (*milikkitacchin*): it was powerful because of its signifying action, by its relation to God. When I later pursued the question with another monk, he added to this that two thieves had been crucified with Jesus, but that we did not venerate their crosses – it was not the cross or crosses in general, but the specific connection between the sign of the cross and the historic Crucifixion, that lent power to the sign (Keane 2005).

By contrast, as Abba S'om made very clear to me, the Eucharistic Host is not a sign, but the actual flesh and blood of God – Christ, he told me, did not say, "This is a sign of my flesh"; he said, "This *is* my flesh." The Eucharistic ritual is densely packed with things that are signs, such as censers that represent the flame of God within Mary's womb, and the imprinting of thirteen crosses on the holy bread. This semiotic work is required to consecrate the things of the ritual, but the sacrament that they enable is no sign, but the thing itself. This relationship - signs that facilitate actual irruptions of divinity - is crucial to understanding the wider dynamics of Orthodox materiality, especially the ways of consecration, which will be discussed in the next section.

The material focus of the Eucharistic ritual, and of any Ethiopian Orthodox Church, is the *tabot* or Ark – a kind of object that has obsessed European observers as well as Ethiopian Christians (Amsalu 2015). A *tabot* is a tablet or box of tablets that

resides in the inner sanctum of a church and is said to resemble the tablets given to Moses on Mount Sinai, and by extension to be a representation of the Ark of the Covenant. It is this *tabot*, one of the most distinctive elements of Ethiopian practice, that is consecrated by a bishop when a new church is founded. No lay person is permitted to see it, and certainly no woman, and it only leaves the sanctum of the church on certain festival days, under a finely brocaded shroud, where it is brought to bless the waters.

The *tabot* is probably best understood as the dwelling place of divinity (Pankhurst 1987, Getatchew 1988). My friend Ralph Lee (pers. comm.) tells a story of an old women who, seeing the *tabot* paraded on Epiphany, began to address it as "My Lord, my Lord," (*gétayé*) whereupon those close by, concerning that she was speaking to the *tabot*, corrected her that this was only the home of our Lord, and not God himself. The concern about faithful but uneducated people mistaking sign for signified is a recurrent trope especially among the priesthood and the current generation of educated and engaged young Orthodox Christians.

One could make the case that it is the richness, even redundancy, of Orthodox material-symbolic culture that most fully conveys the beyond-ness of God. If the sign is clearly marked as a sign, there must logically be a referent behind it, and that referent must be in some way unavailable to the senses, or no sign would be required in the first place.

But again, *tabot*s are not mere signs; they are bearers of divine power -and not just powerful in an Actor-Network Theory, objects-have-agency sense (Latour 2005). Rumours persist that they are made of gold rather than wood, and in Zege constant vigilance is required against their theft. My friend Thomas told me about a man who had been frozen to the spot in the course of trying to steal a *tabot*, struck down by

God. More pragmatically, when the *tabot*s of Zege spend the night outside of the church, on the eve of epiphany, they are kept in a tent under armed guard. Some people even told me that these were replicas (*missil*), because the real things were too valuable to be kept out at night. This would make them replicas of replicas of the ark of the covenant. Note how easily the holy potency of the *tabot* gets construed as material value, something at risk of being stolen by the unscrupulous. It is not easy to separate God from gold, and requires constant vigilance – which becomes a figure for defending the Orthodox faith against perceived threats from Islam, secularism, and Protestantism.

For Ethiopian Orthodox Christians, a *tabot* is a dwelling place of the divine. For it to be fit for this purpose, it must satisfy certain material and historical conditions: it must be crafted in symbolic resemblance of the tablets of Moses, and it must have been consecrated by a bishop by the proper rituals. This is a combination of material-symbolic affordances of the *tabot*-as-object, combined with a relational aspect (priest-*tabot*-God) that must be correctly inaugurated and authorized.

Consecration: symbolic form and holy power

A *tabot* is a man-made object that becomes powerful through consecration by a bishop. Once again, resemblance to a historical sacred prototype combines with the actual transfer of holy potency, and neither aspect alone appears sufficient. What follows is not an authoritative account of Ethiopian Orthodox theology, which in any case is famously non-systematic (Cowley 1989, Binns 2013). It is, rather, an attempt to outline key practices around which questions about sanctity and material things coalesce. Issues of religious materiality are never fully resolved by doctrine, but are focal points of debate, uncertainty, and critical reflection (Keane 2014, Reinhardt

2016).

A bishop can consecrate a *tabot*, and can also perform the sacrament of Holy Orders, which ordains priests and qualifies them to perform, in turn, the sacrament of the Eucharist (Fritsch 1999: 78). For the bishop to be ordained in his own right requires three other bishops (Getnet 1998: 102); although the time was when only the Patriarch of the Egyptian Coptic Church could ordain clergy.

Each act of consecration, then, must have been empowered and authorized by previous consecrations. The initial conditions of possibility for all of these acts are, first, the Incarnation, which makes any kind of salvation possible, and then, the miracle of the sacraments: the granting by God's free grace (*s'ega*) of certain means for invoking the divine activation or authorization of particular persons or things. Quite often the sacraments are themselves enabled by other sacraments, multiplying and extending chains of blessing and grace.

As well as the objects of sacraments, numerous ancillary objects require consecration – more or less anything that will reside in a Church and partake in the Eucharistic ritual: the clergy's robes, the cups and plates, copies of the scriptures, memorial tablets for the dead (Aymro & Motovu 1970). In each case – and around churches generally – the proliferation of symbolism is so great that descriptions can seem monotonous, with each number or form referring to a scared prototype: thirteen crosses on the communion bread for the apostles; nine eggs atop the church for the nine saints; three concentric chambers in the church for the Trinity, and so forth.

During a tour of the Orthodox museum in Addis Ababa, the guide showed me a single censer and explained how the orb that held the incense signified the womb of Mary, in which the flame was Christ's divinity and the incense, his giving of himself. The smoke would rise from the orb as prayers do. He then pointed me to the three

ornate chains (for the Trinity) that held the orb suspended. Each had eight bells, making twenty-four for the twenty-four priests of the holy kingdom (1 Chronicles 24).

He then showed me some bishop's scepters and began to talk about how material objects can have power, using the example of Moses's staff, which parted the Red Sea, but only because of the holiness of its bearer, and the agency of God. He explained that holy items in general have power but that power is entirely dependent upon the spiritual condition of the person who handles them. But in cases of sufficient holiness, the results were spectacular: when monks wrote parchment books, he told me, they would test them by applying fire and immersing in water. If the books survived, they were known to be good.

Density of material symbols does appear to enhance the spiritual power of an object. But it is crucial to understand how this power is conceived: always as activating a beyondness, which is a relationship with God. The symbols on the censer and similar objects have to be understood in indexical terms as things whose primary function is to draw disparate things into relation: to relate the item to God. This is why, with sacred symbols, resemblance or repetition of certain key details – a number, or the shape of a cross – is sufficient. The symbols do not represent for the purpose of creating a logical or verbal communication, or for explicating an argument, but as devices of pure connection with the beyond. A proliferation of symbols creates a density of points of relation, all drawing themselves into relation with God.

It should now be clearer why symbolic form and sanctified authorization tend to go together – both involve a drawing-into-relation. They engage things and persons with God in intrinsically subordinate fashion (the symbol is less than the signified); alternatively put, they activate and reveal a divine presence that was always there *in*

potentia (Hanganu 2010). Consecration and symbolic form work together to address and give evidence for that which is beyond the material symbol and infinitely greater than it.

The symbolic form and consecration of sacred things draws people toward it, as well as divinity: Eucharistic rituals and fonts of holy water give people strong incentives to gather in church spaces. In this sense consecration appears as a particularly intense example of how "thinging gathers" (Heidegger 1971: 172): consecrated things and substances bring human and divine actors or powers into relationship with one another over time. Acts of consecration draw things (robes, water, plates and cups) into historical trajectories of sacred action; symbolic forms make them into, or reveal them as, relational entities. But for Orthodoxy, the terms of these relations are not equal. One party can only be hinted at or intimated by semiosis, and can never be contained by the material. Acts of consecration, however, are acts of empowerment as well as representation. Controversies and questions about the state of matter in Orthodox practice revolve around the nuances of this duality.

In all of these relations (or acts of drawing-into-relation) among people, things, and God, the state of the flesh is crucial. Bishops must be virgins as well as possessing the requisite ordination, and anybody who engages with religious objects must have fasted and refrained from polluting action. Similar principles apply to the creation of religious objects: to make an icon, a person must fast and pray in silence, as one church painter in Zege told me, "so that the holy spirit passes through" (see also Johnson 2011). For one thing, this displays how all material creation and representation must be understood as proceeding from divine agency (Messay 1999); for another, it shows how, to enter relations with saints and God, both person and image must enter the correct disciplinary condition. When we thing of religious things

as primarily tools of drawing-into-relation (which is an other-relation or a relation with a beyond), their dependence on fleshly discipline becomes clearer.

To round out our account of the relationship between semiotic beyondness, empowerment, and consecration, it is worth considering magical traditions, which have long occupied an ambiguous position at the edges of the Orthodox church's aegis (Mercier 1997, Boylston 2012). The classical figure is that of the *debtera*, a term that denotes both a non-ordained church singer-ritualist, and a sorcerer who traffics with demons (Young 1975). A *debtera* is a person steeped in the esoteric knowledge of the church, who may apply that knowledge to non-sacred purposes – largely as a result of the fact that they have refused ordination.

What is clear is that the magical and quasi-legitimate practices of *debtera* retain the beyondness associated with proper religious practice, though the beyond that they address may be demonic. What complicates matters is that, since demons are subordinate to God, any action that addresses them may still be construed as morally upright.

Take the following statement from Mercier's extended study of magico-religious art:

> "Names and talismans were revealed together…the origin of every talisman is the cross, and, at the same time, that Christ's cross is the visible form of a sign that is the Name of God" (Mercier 1997: 48-50).

Talismans tend to serve the purpose of commanding demons, and they are understood to address the demon directly, rather than the patient (Mercier 1997: 95). The form taken by talisman can be either writing on a goatskin scroll, or paintings that combine

text and figurative imagery (Mercier 1997, Malara n.d.) – but in each case it is the act of addressing – and invoking a superior authority with that address – that makes the items effective. As one *debtera* explains to Mercier, "Like a log in the fire that one has forgotten to put out, a prayer without a talisman will not be found the next morning. *Without its seal, a royal edict has no force to compel*" (Mercier 1997: 42, emphasis added).

In practice, most lay people understand the work of *debtera* to extend beyond the valuable service of protecting people from demonic attack, and into the realm of curses (*irgiman*). These curses frequently afflict the flesh; friends in Zege were fond of telling me how *debtera* could curse you with uncontrollable flatulence. Again, we return to the flesh. One *debtera* in Zege told me that he had not entered the priesthood because he had not want to keep to the rules – his friend helpfully interjected that he wanted to have premarital sex. Otherworldly knowledge – the esoteric knowledge necessary to address the beyond – combined with a lack of fleshly discipline is dangerous and potentially demonic. By violating the codes of continence and discipline of the flesh, *debtera* are imagined to attack others. But what they are not is idolators. They do not mistake signs for the things themselves, but are experts in semiotic relations with the beyond.

Conclusion

'No one ever worshipped the material; only the life that has been fixed in it by the consecration. The image is only reverenced for the power that abides in it.' – Hocart, *Councillors and Kings*, p. 244

Concerns about materiality revolve around how one relates to an authority and power

understood to be beyond the material thing but engaged with or invested in it. The three domains of concern that I have identified – flesh, idolatry, and consecration – are connected in practice, because the consecration of things (that which makes them non-idolatrous) requires discipline of the flesh of those who interact with them, usually by fasting at a minimum. This principle is wide-ranging: painters must fast before painting icons, and monks must fast before composing holy verses.

This is a religious system in which it is a general principle that all knowledge and creativity come from God (Messay 1999). Human acts of creation then entail simply the preparation of the human flesh-spirit amalgam to be in a suitable condition to receive and become a channel for the divine creative power that actually makes things happen. This is the defining feature of the religious relationship between bodies and things. It may be overstating matters to say that humans are always simply vessels for divine action – ontological doctrines are not so fixed or consistent. But it is clear that, in any act of religious communication or creativity, the central point of concern around which these questions coalesce is the relationship between human flesh, the material substance as point of beyond-relation, and the creative agency of God, the original iconographer. The problem of nature worship as idolatry similarly revolves around the failure to notice the things of nature (*tefet'ro*, literally 'the having-been-created') as created by an agency beyond themselves.

Relations to this beyond are built through human bodies, consecrated things, and the ritual actions and signs that empower and connect them. This empowerment/drawing-together works through (1) the invocation or address of authority, by (2) acts and forms of analogical resemblance which represent (re-enact, identify with) historic acts of devotion.

The received understanding of iconoclasm and idolatry is that iconoclasts see

in idolators a failure to recognize man-made things as man-made: they treat their own creations as self-creating Gods (Latour 2002). Of course, this entails some questionable projections on the part of the iconoclast, because fetishists and idolators are usually well aware of the place of the idol in a web of heterogeneous relations.

It is possible to read Ethiopian material semiotic practice in a more radical light: idolators and iconoclasts alike are those who fail to realize that humans themselves are representations, albeit privileged ones among the created things of nature. Human-made icons and religious objects would then be, in a certain sense and from a certain perspective, the same kind of things as human beings: created images – though humans are crucially differentiated by possession of a soul.[2]

I am not sure whether I can claim that this is the opinion of most Orthodox Christians, for whom the notion of human as image may or may not make sense. But there is certainly value in noticing that, for Orthodox Christians in Ethiopia, humans, animals, and materials are alike created things. But so are angels and spirits, which is further evidence that the distinction between material and immaterial is not the correct one to follow here (Teferi Abate, pers.comm.).

What we learn from this perspective is that the material history and form of the created beings have implications for their spiritual status: flesh that has fasted and been baptized; images that have been blessed and that resemble (and therefore directly address) holy actors; *tabot*s that resemble the Ark of the covenant and the stone tablets, and that remain hidden from view, untouched by impure hands. The form and condition of created things enables them to be drawn back into relation with their creator.

Semiotic density and historical reference – achieved through symbolic form, or fasting, or ritual consecration – pull attention away from things or bodies

themselves and to relations with what is beyond them and is understood to have created them. Formal imitation and divine empowerment are part of a single process; but the part played by empowerment is vital – the transfer of divine blessing, making holy water into a healing substance, curing sinful bodies. It is not just the use of material signs to suggest the presence of an absent referent. Material objects have implications for human bodies and vice versa, each construed as a being subordinate to something else. Furthermore, they are understood to draw power – the actual potential to heal and harm, to curse and redeem – from that other-relation.

The relationship between materiality and authority, then, hinges on how material things can be connected with or oriented toward that which is beyond them – and hence, by implication, more powerful. This entails formal resemblance, often repeated to the point of redundancy, and historically situated acts of empowerment, often achieved through heroic asceticism, or the institutionalized transmission of charisma. This approach to materiality and power is intrinsically hierarchical, as are the oppositional or amoral forms of magic that, while they violate Church norms, participate in the same logic of hierarchical relations with powers beyond. There is a temporal dimension to this relationship: not just spatial relations among material things, but the relation of tangible objects to events and personages of the past. For this reason as well, we may do better to ask not what are the limits of matter against immateriality, but how, in specific religious ecologies, is it possible to make relations beyond what can be directly perceived.

I want to bring out one more point by way of conclusion. Processes of consecration are never finished. Bodies and things are never fully or finally subjugated to God's authority, and discourses of anti-idolatry and consecration are never the only viable options for dealing with the willfulness of life. A *tabot*, once

consecrated, is not left alone in splendid isolation, but becomes the basis of the ritual feeding of the parish. Twice a year it is brought outside the church to bless a body of water, and the blessed substance is then distributed among the people (Boylston 2012). It serves the needs of a community of living bodies, and is therefore always engaged in the processes of life, growth, and reproduction – processes which, if mishandled, would be desecrating. The reorientation and drawing-into-relation of bodies, things, and the beyond, as described in this paper, is not a one way transformation from profane things into sacred ones. It is an ongoing process of the maintenance of authority.

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[1] As in many languages, the word for spirit (*menfes*) is cognate with those for breath (*tinfash*) and wind (*nifas*). Which shows either that spirit is not conceived of as entirely immaterial, or that it is quite difficult to conceive of non-material things without deep-lying physical metaphors.

[2] The notion of humans as images can be found in John of Damascus, and the philosophically-inclined work of Messay Kebede (as well as a lengthy post-Platonic patristic tradition that has certainly had significant influence in Ethiopia – Cowley 1989, Lee 2011). There is, likewise, an extensive Roman Catholic tradition of thought on the *Imago Dei*, in which the human resemblance to God (having been created in

his own image) can be understood not as a claim that humans are divine, but that human existence is always a relation to God by virtue of resemblance (e.g. Moltmann 1985: 220).